Title: The Stranger

Author: Albert Camus

Year of Publication: 1942

Setting and time period:

20th century in Algiers, French Algeria

Primary characters:

Meursault – protagonist, relationship with Marie, office worker, disconnected from emotions, brutally honest and faithful to his own philosophies

Marie Cardona – Secretary for Meursault’s office, overly emotional, easily trusting, in a relationship with Meursault

Raymond Silvés – friend/neighbor of Meursault, warehouse guard, also very emotional, dishonest with others, more willing to break laws

Secondary characters:

Maman – Meursault’s mother, dies in beginning, Meursault feels little sadness

Thomas Perez – friend/lover of Meursault’s mother

Meursault’s boss – offers him a job in Paris, job is declined

Salamano – old guy with an old dog

Celeste – café owner

Masson – friend of Raymond, owner of beach house

Raymond’s girlfriend – Arab woman, cheats on and is beat up by Raymond

Arabs – brother of Raymond’s woman and friends, harass Raymond and Meursault

Magistrate – very religious prosecutor of Meursault

Point of view and other notable structural, literary and stylistic techniques:

Written in first person from the view of Meursault. Camus writes in short and direct sentences, similar to Meursault’s forthcoming and brutally honest personality. Originally written in French, has been translated multiple times, the most recent by Matthew Ward.

Major Conflicts:

-Raymond’s conflict with his former girlfriend and her brother, resolved when Meursault shoots her brother and ends his following of Raymond

-Conflict between Meursault and figures involved in religion, resolved when Meursault refuses to see the chaplain once more just before his execution

-Conflict with Meursault and the murderer that others portray him as, resolved when lawyers paint him as an emotionless sociopath and sentence him to the guillotine

Key scenes:

-Funeral/vigil for Madame Meursault (13-18)

-The funeral for Meursault’s mother helps to introduce his defining character traits. It does this by also introducing Thomas Perez, who was a good friend of his late mother. Perez is a foil to Meursault, and feels great sadness at the passing of his friend. Meursault on the other hand is hardly moved and spends his mother’s vigil smoking and drinking coffee.

-Death of Salamano’s dog (44-46)

-The death of Salamano’s dog is very relatable to the death of Meursault’s mother. This scene shows an emotional Salamano who is truly distraught over his dog’s disappearance. It helps to create him as a foil to Meursault, who felt little when he heard the news that his mother passed away.

-Shooting of the Arab (57-59)

-This is the climax of the novel, when Meursault shoots the brother of Raymond’s former mistress. This scene is important due to the fact that it is an immediate transition into Part Two, which deals mainly with Meursault’s time in the legal system. It also is important due to the fact that Meursault is compelled to commit the crime by the intense heat and light, lending itself to the “man is controlled by nature” argument.

-“Monsieur Antichrist” scene (68-71)

-In this scene, Meursault viciously denies the magistrate who attempts to get him to confess his crimes and beg for forgiveness from God. Although Meursault may want to take this short cut out of further punishment, he stays true to his own beliefs and completely rejects those of the magistrate.

Key quotations:

“Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don’t know. I got a telegram from the home: ‘Mother deceased. Funeral tomorrow. Faithfully yours.’ That doesn’t mean anything. Maybe it was yesterday.” –Meursault, page 3. Introduction to the novel, introduces Meursault’s defining character traits: his lack of emotion over most things and his brutal honesty that accompanies it.

“At times like this… make them stop.” – Meursault, page 110. This quotation is a story about Meursault’s father when he went to see an execution. This segment of the book talks a lot about the fate of the condemned, as well as the cruelty of the death penalty. This quote is a comment about the sickening effects of the guillotine.

“’To get back to… she cheated on me.’” – Raymond, page 30. This quotation comes from one of Meursault’s first encounters with Raymond. In it, Raymond talks passionately about his situation with his former lover. This sets Raymond up as a foil to Meursault. Not only is Raymond quite passionate and emotional about her affair, but he is not quite honest with Meursault, as it is revealed at the end of the novel that he might have actually been her pimp instead of her boyfriend.

**Themes:  Is there a meaning to life?**

The Philosophy of the Absurd:

Society constantly attempts to apply logical explanations to illogical situations, such as justifying Merseault’s intentions in killing the Arab when he himself can’t explain why he did it.

The Futility of Life:

People cannot overcome the inevitability of death, and it is only once Merseault realizes this that he truly becomes happy.

Isolation:

Isolation from society is necessary for people to realize their true meaning, and achieve happiness.

**Literary Devices:**

Sun Motif:

Merseault’s main argument in his defense trial is that the sun caused him to kill the Arab.  We see the sun throughout the novel cause Merseault to be angry, tired, contented, etc.  The belief that man’s actions are controlled by some outside force coincide with Camus’ beliefs that man has no say in his final destiny, death.

Observation Motif:

Countless times, Merseault finds himself watching people.  He spent an entire Sunday just watching people from his balcony, and follows the old robot-lady around just to see what she’s like.  Merseault tries to learn about society by observing it, a motif that is also present in Siddhartha.  In order to blend in to society, and become “happy” you have to watch people, see their faults, see their strengths, and learn from them as if they were your own experiences.

Crucifix Symbolism:

Merseault rejects the crucifix twice, and in doing so rejects everything associated with it.  Not only does Merseault disagree with religion, he also disagrees with conforming to society, afterlife, *meaning* in life.  It’s basically Camus rejecting living a life based on irrationalities.

**Reader Response:**

It’s interesting how Merseault wants to have a large crowd at his execution.  Even though society has failed him, he still wants to help them, to show them their shortcomings by exploiting the irrationality of his situation.  The only reason we execute people is because they are a threat to society, but in Merseault’s case, you can argue fairly easily that he’s not much of one.

Merseault finds happiness after isolation and after an epiphany.  It seems like this is a major trend in writing, as we’ve seen works like Siddhartha and Portrait.

Although I can agree that to a certain degree, the “futility of life” theme does exist, I do not think that it should serve as the main philosophy for which someone lives their life.  If everyone did this, no one would try at anything and everyone would be miserable.  By trying to do our best and all that cliche garbage, we actually create our own meaning and become a lot like Sisyphus.

**Appropriate for Questions:**

Analyze a work in which exile helps a character to achieve a greater sense of happiness, success, or other positive outcome.

Analyze a work in which a character has an epiphany and how it contributes to the meaning of the work.